DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 373 583 FL 022 436

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TITLE Experimenting with a Community Language Learning Principle in an English as a Second Language Writing Class.
PUB DATE [94]
NOTE 22p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Techniques; English (Second Language); *Foreign Students; *Graduate Students; Higher Education; Lesson Plans; Questionnaires; *Second Language Instruction; *Speech Skills; Student Attitudes; Teaching Methods; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS Community Language Learning

ABSTRACT

This paper describes a paraphrasing activity devised to assist English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) graduate students at Ohio State University develop their academic writing skills. The activity is based on the community language learning approach. The students in the class were divided into groups of three, with each group member in turn assigned the role of author, listener, and timer. The author would present the main ideas of their essay to the listener in four minutes, after which the listener would rephrase the author's ideas in and express them in their own words. The timer ensured that no one exceeded the time limits. The entire activity was videotaped for later student and teacher reflection and discussion. Discussions with students and student responses to a questionnaire on the paraphrasing activity found that most students liked the activity, thought it should be used more often, and felt they were able to present their own ideas and the ideas of others effectively. Three appendixes contain copies of the activity lesson plan, a representative list of student concerns about the activity before it took place, and the student survey form administered after the activity. (MDM)

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Experimenting with a Community Language Learning Principle in an English as a Second Language Writing Class

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Running Head: EXPERIMENTING

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Experimenting with a Community Language Learning Principle in an English as a Second Language Writing Class

One of the most important yet misunderstood writing skills for English as a second language (ESL) learners is paraphrasing. This skill is especially important for ESL graduate students who are working on research papers. For them, appropriate use of paraphrasing might make the difference between successfully writing the paper or being accused of plagiarizing an uncited (or inaccurately cited) source. So passing or failing a course at times hinges on one's ability to paraphrase.

In an effort to help ESL graduate students acquire this difficult writing skill, the author devised an activity based on information learned in a Community Language Learning (CLL) course. His intention was not to teach writing from a CLL perspective, but to translate the understanding session commonly used in CLL courses into a workable paraphrasing activity. Understanding would serve as the basis for a task in which one student listens to a classmate present information about a paper he/she has written, and then attempts to rephrase that information in his/her own words. The aim would be for paraphrasing without placing judgment on the material. In this respect, the listener would be portraying an understander in Stevick's (1980) sense: he/she tries to understand the messenger without criticizing the message. So the activity would be an adaptation of a CLL principle applied to the important area of paraphrasing in academic writing.

Below is a self-observation of an ESL class that incorporated a modified understanding session to promote improved student paraphrasing skills. The observation consists of four parts: setting, detailed description, analysis, and response.

Self-observation of the Class

Setting

The author's English 107G composition course was videotaped from noon to 12:48 p.m. on Thursday March 4, 1993. English 107G is designed for international graduate students at the Ohio State University to prepare them for academic writing. The course is taught as an intermediate step between the more grammar-based English 106 composition course and English 108.02, which focuses on research paper writing.

The 16 students in this class were all Asian, representing the countries of China (five students), Taiwan (five), Japan (three), Korea (two), and Thailand (one). A Taiwanese student had studied Japanese; otherwise, the students spoke English as their only second language. There were four doctoral-level and 12 masters-level students in the class, and four of the students also worked as graduate assistants (three Ph.D. and one M.A.). The average length of residence in the United States for them was about eight months, with a range of three months to two years. To be enrolled in this course, students had to have been admitted into a graduate program (10 different academic areas were represented). Lastly, they either were placed directly into English 107G on the basis of a diagnostic essay or had moved up from English 106.

Description

Note: During the previous day's class, the teacher explained the specifics of the assignment to the students. That explanation was given in order to allow them the opportunity to prepare their presentations beforehand. Thus, the instructions referred to below were a review for the students.

The class began with the teacher giving instructions and details about the lesson, referred to as an understanding session. He then commented on reactions students made during the morning tutorials. All five students from the morning remarked that they thought the activity would be difficult. (See Appendix B.) The teacher asked the class to relax and assured them that no grade would be assigned for their participation. He went on to suggest that they all try to ignore the camera that was being used to videotape the class.

At this point, the teacher explained that students would be divided into groups of three, and that a role (author, listener, or timer) would be assigned to each student. Next, he discussed the three roles in detail. In sum, the author was responsible for two things: presenting the main ideas of his/her paper for four minutes and helping the listener understand that presentation. The listener was to try to comprehend the author's message by listening intently and asking for clarification when necessary. Thereafter, the listener had three minutes to rephrase the author's message. Finally, the timer had the task of ensuring that no one exceeded the time limit.

The teacher also mentioned the purpose of the activity from the point of view of author and listener. The role of author was designed in order to help students clarify their own thoughts concerning their papers. The teacher noted that speaking about a topic in detail requires a certain degree of forethought and planning. By reflecting on the paper, and subsequently presenting it, the paper's content might become better organized.

From the listener's perspective, the exercise would provide students a chance to rephrase someone else's ideas, which is really the essence of paraphrasing. The teacher observed that people automatically paraphrase

what is heard. The human brain is not constructed in such a way as to allow for literal recall of verbal information. Ideas are remembered, not words, yet paraphrasing remains one of the most difficult tasks for ESL writers.

The teacher continued by presenting a brief outline of the remainder of the class period. A class reflection period would follow the understanding session. This part of the lesson would allow students to openly converse about their reactions to the activity. Finally, the students would be required to complete a written evaluation of the understanding session. The evaluation would be worked on in class; thereafter, students would be asked to take it home and add other comments, if possible. The teacher asked if there were any questions; there were none.

The students were then placed into groups of three. For the most part, they were grouped by their proximity to one another. In other words, three people sitting nearest to each other formed a group. In the case of three Japanese students sitting together, the teacher encouraged them to split up and form a groups with different students. They did so, and the teacher then told all groups to select an author, listener, and timer. They were reminded that each student would eventually perform each role, so they should not waste time deciding on who would do which role first. All groups were working by 12:15 p.m.

As students participated in the activity, the teacher moved from group to group making sure all went well. The cameraperson remained in the center of the room and filmed one group at work at a time. A teacher-trainer was also present in the room. She listened in on the discussions of two

groups. Basically, she observed and took notes on the interactions of student to student and of student to teacher.

The first group finished at 12:35 p.m. and the last at 12:39 p.m. As groups concluded the activity, the teacher asked them to think about their reactions to it. He especially wanted them to consider the effectiveness of the activity in terms of clarifying and organizing their own ideas and rephrasing those of others.

The teacher opened the class reflection period with the following questions: "How did you feel about doing this? In tutorials, people indicated that it was going to be difficult. Now that you've done it, has your opinion changed or is it a difficult activity? Would you recommend using it next quarter?" There was a pause.

Student 1: "I think it is really a good thing; it's fun, helpful. We can just, you know, also learn some, you know, some other's majors and help us to also do something with repeat, you know, such as when finished her paper, I can just try to repeat what she said...a good exercise for that."

Teacher: "So you are saying that this is a useful activity for rephrasing and uh..." At this point student 1 interrupted.

Student 1: "rephrasing and also for gaining some knowledge from other majors, you know."

Teacher: "So also it was interesting because you learned something about the other majors, the students' studies."

Student 1: "Yes."

Another student voiced concern over the difficulty of field-specific terms. He suggested that all students in class read the same article, and

then discuss that in groups. This would allow them to overcome the vocabulary problem.

A third student wanted the class grouped according to academic major. He suggested: "The same major, of the same major area divided into one group, I think it is better."

Teacher: "So you're saying if I divided you by major, that would have been better."

Student 3: "Yes, the same major, the same major in one group." This statement led to a large reaction from the other students. Most of them seemed to disagree with this student.

Another student commented: "I think the current method is pretty good."

Teacher: "What is good?"

Student 4: "The current method, the current way."

Then someone argued that the speaker's time was too short, and that it be extended to five minutes. Many of the others nodded agreement to this suggestion. Finally, the last student to respond felt that this type of activity should be used in place of the grammar exercises taken from the Azar (1989) book.

Time had run out, so the teacher handed out the written evaluations and asked that the students carefully and thoughtfully answer each question at home. Their responses would be collected at the start of the following class.

Analysis

The initial directions provided a framework in which the students would later work. These instructions were thorough and detailed enough to

clear up problems students may have encountered when they prepared for class. Also, the calm demeanor of the instructor helped to build a relaxed atmosphere in the room.

The arrangement of students into groups was accomplished quickly and with little hesitation on the their part. The one exception to this involved the three Japanese students. They were asked to separate in order to promote a sense of togetherness, of community, in the classroom. In so doing, the teacher emphasized the need for intergroup cooperation and communication.

Once the understanding session began, there was a great deal of activity, which indicated that the students had understood the directions. For the next 25 minutes, the teacher did little more than observe the students work. In essence, the students were in control of their own learning. As they listened to their classmates' presentations, they learned more about each other, again fostering a sense of community in the classroom. They also learned more about what paraphrasing really is and how it is done.

Furthermore, groups that were working quickly were asked to slow down so as to finish at approximately the same time as the others. This was done to maintain student interest in the activity. For the same reason, the first students to complete the task were told to take a couple of minutes to think about what did and did not go well during the activity.

Finally, the reflection period resulted in insightful comments from the students. They seemed willing to share their opinions, even to the point of debating over them (e.g., two students disagreed with one another on the issue of random grouping versus grouping by major). Also, the teacher's

nonjudgmental comments contributed to the students' confidence in expressing themselves.

In summary, the directions provided an appropriate framework for the lesson, the students understood them and participated accordingly, and the teacher elicited valuable feedback during the reflection period. Overall, the activity was a success.

In addition to the above, the teacher-trainer who observed the class offered her analysis. She mentioned that the students responded very well to the teacher. His sitting, as opposed to standing, position conveyed a sense of ease in the room. He had put himself down to the actual physical level of the students, and that helped to reduce anxiety in the room. She also remarked that the rationale provided by the teacher at the beginning of class helped to clarify the relationship between academic rephrasing and the theory behind it. This explanation enabled students to better understand why they were doing the activity (N. Chism, personal communication, March 8, 1993).

According to the observer, the teacher's open-ended, or playground, questions allowed room for students to reply with divergent answers. This eliminated the need for correct responses. The teacher refrained from placing judgement on answers, thus encouraging students to participate freely. She also noted that the teacher patiently permitted silence after posing the questions. She commented that this wait-time is often necessary to allow students to organize their thoughts about a particular topic. These pauses would be especially important for ESL students, who must struggle not only with the content but also with the language.

The observer further commented that the pacing was appropriate and that the rapport between teacher and students was excellent. She explained that a positive rapport with students can help to overcome pedagogical deficiencies, but pedagogical skill may not be enough to overcome a negative teacher-student relationship. Her one criticism had to do with the use of gender-biased language when speaking with students. She observed that the teacher referred once to the role of author as he. Such gender bias needs to be avoided in the future. Overall though, there were no major problems with the activity; she thought it succeeded in its intended purpose.

Response

Basically, there are two important lessons that can gleaned from this understanding session. First, the teacher does not have to be, in the words of Rardin et al. (1988), standing for something every class period in order for students to learn. This activity placed the responsibility for learning squarely of the shoulders of the learners. It empowered them to learn first by listening to the teacher, then by performing the activity, and finally by reflecting on the experience. Thus, the instructor provided the boundaries for learning, but the students themselves negotiated their own path toward the educational goal: in this case, paraphrasing.

Second, students enjoyed having someone listen to them talk about their academic work. During the activity, the listener was forced to pay close attention to the speaker. The speaker, therefore, was enabled to share his/her subject knowledge with an interested peer, making the activity a highly communicative one.

Lastly, there are two modifications to this exercise that should be made prior to administering it again. First, it should be implemented after the initial draft of each paper (the students write three drafts per paper), as opposed to its use following the second draft as in this example. The reason for an earlier appearance is primarily for the benefit of the writer. Requiring writers to orally present their papers at an early stage in the writing process maximizes the potential for revision to result. In other words, by the second draft students are less likely to reorganize their papers. They would have already put too much time and effort into them to make any major modifications. Thus, directing students to reflect on and present the main ideas of the paper early on will more likely have an impact on the writers structuring of it.

Second, the activity should be performed with students grouped according to academic major. This type of grouping would allow for a comparison of students responses to the random grouping method described above. The effectiveness of one form of grouping versus the other could then be gauged.

Review of the written student evaluations

The following are representative examples of student comments. Some grammatical and stylistic misuses have been altered to allow for a more readable presentation of ideas. Where comprehension is not impeded, grammatical and stylistic deviations have been left intact. Subsequent to these examples will be comments from this author.

1. What did you like/dislike about this activity?

(A) This activity can train us to express our ideas and listen to others.

(B) Not only can I have a lecture to introduce my paper to others, which makes me feel more confident, but also I can listen to others' papers and know their field as well as exchange opinions directly.

(C) It is limited on only listening and speaking training with no relation to composition.

(D) I like the flexibility of this activity. Students could express what they have written. The listener could improve their listening skills and also the ability of rephrasing what has been heard.

Comments: The overwhelming majority of the responses were complimentary toward this activity. The most apparent reason for this positive reaction was the enjoyment the students seemed to have as they communicated with their peers. In other words, they liked having someone listen intently to what they had to say. Being able to explain ideas to a noncritical counterpart is a situation most individuals encounter all too infrequently, and these students took full advantage of their opportunity.

Also, having an understanding peer to talk to reduces the level of formality involved in presenting papers orally, thus decreasing anxiety in the classroom as well. The relaxed atmosphere this activity naturally fosters thus facilitated student confidence as public speakers, a benefit not originally anticipated.

2. If this activity was helpful to you as a writer of English, how was it helpful?

(A) Nothing about it was helpful.

(B) I think written and oral communications are deeply related. As a speaker, the author must paraphrase his/her own work.

(C) It helped me to understand the true meaning of rephrasing.

(D) By rephrasing others' sentences, it could help us to rephrase our own sentences.

Comments: Aside from the one disapproving reaction, the students seemed to find this lesson helpful in understanding the very difficult, and in many cases totally foreign, concept of paraphrasing. Paraphrasing is an essential skill for the students' success in their academic careers. The reaction the understanding session evoked regarding paraphrasing leaves no question that this type of activity will be repeated next quarter.

3. If it was not helpful, how was it inappropriate?

(A) The listener was not familiar with the subject so he/she could use only the exact words that the speaker used.

(B) Since everyone comes from different areas, it was difficult for me to understand other people's speech.

(C) I think it was very helpful.

Comments: The major objection to the understanding session was not related so much to whether or not the activity was successful, rather it was focused on the manner in which the students were grouped. In other words, the complaint was that the listener's comprehension was impeded because he/she was randomly grouped without regard to academic fields. The result of such grouping led to some groups with three students from three different academic areas. A solution suggested by two separate students involved grouping by major. In this way, students would already be familiar with the field-specific jargon used by the author. They could then concentrate on the author's intended message, rather than struggling with technical vocabulary. Although this comment seems sensible enough, a number of other students liked the activity for the exact reason that they were able to

learn a little about the divergent academic pursuits of their classmates.

4. Would you recommend that I use this activity more frequently (e.g., once for each of the three papers) next quarter? Why or why not? (Two students recommended it not be used at all, three suggested it be used for two papers, and eight advised it be used for all three papers.)

(A) Yes, as long as you make some modifications.

(B) No, because we are not native speakers. We cannot understand some parts of what a speaker said.

(C) Yes, because I think it is really helpful to students, both the writer and the listener.

(D) Yes. This activity is more active and interesting than other classes so far. I think two times a quarter is better.

Comments. The students were nearly unanimously in favor of recommending the understanding session for use next quarter (two students dissented). In fact, most students suggested that this type of lesson be implemented for all three assigned, out-of-class papers.

5. As the speaker (the one being understood), were you able to adequately explain the main ideas of your paper? Y / N

Do you think you were understood? Y / N Explain.

(A) Yes, but the listener missed some of my details.

(B) Six minutes would have been more appropriate for me to express my paper.

(C) I can express the main ideas of my paper very well, I think. But due to the differences of majors, it was usually hard for others to understand what I was saying. Similarly, I could not understand the others.

(D) Yes, I can explain the main ideas of my paper. Because when the listener rephrases them, I know he/she has grasped my main points.

(E) Yes, I can speak simply and slowly to let people understand, but my explanation cannot be completely understood because of the difference of major.

Comments: It is clear that being the listener was more difficult than speaking about an already written paper. Three reasons were cited by students as the primary causes for the difficulty in rephrasing the author's ideas. First, four minutes was not enough time for the author to adequately summarize his/her paper. There seemed to be a consensus among students that the speaker be given additional time. Second, the instructions for the third paper explicitly stated that students write to an audience of specialists in their field. These instructions would have influenced the writer's organization of ideas and choice of vocabulary items, both to the detriment of the nonspecialist listener. For example, the understanding of a music major listening to a biogeneticist would be impaired by the specificity of vocabulary inherent in the field itself. Third, lack of practice contributed to inadequacies in presenting main ideas, understanding them, and putting them into one's own words.

6. As the listener (the one doing the understanding), were you able to rephrase accurately the speaker's ideas? Y / N Explain.

(A) No, I could not fully understand what the author was trying to say; therefore, there was no clear picture in my mind.

(B) I lost some parts of the speaker's ideas because I did not understand some words. The speaker helped me fill those parts.

(C) Because the author's major was the same as mine, I could understand his relatively easily.

(D) I do not think I can rephrase accurately the speaker's ideas; I could only catch some of the ideas the speaker said. However, this activity is helpful for improving my ability of this kind if I could have used it more often.

(E) Not accurately because I did not understand her idea in only four minutes.

Comments: The rephrasing aspect of understanding, though more difficult to students than presenting original ideas, was perceived as successfully accomplished by the students at a more than two-to-one ratio. Nevertheless, they seemed concerned about their inability to paraphrase all of what they heard. In general, they felt that the main points were grasped, but the details seemed to slip by.

Statistical summary of student responses

Question #1: Did you like/dislike about this activity?	Yes	77%
	No	15%
	Neutral	8%

Question #4: Would you recommend that I use this activity more frequently next quarter?	Do not use	15%
	Use twice	23%
	Use three times	62%

Question #5: (A) As the speaker, were you able to adequately explain the main ideas of your paper?	Yes	85%
	No	15%

(B) Do you think you were understood? Yes 69%

No 31%

Question #6: As the listener, were you able to rephrase accurately the speaker's ideas? Yes 69%

No 31%

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Appendix A

Below is the actual lesson plan used for the understanding session followed by a approximate timeframe for each aspect of it.

1. Introduction: Try to reduce the anxiety level in the room; reassure the students; tell them not to worry. Explain the three roles involved.

Author--speaks about his/her paper for four minutes.

--presents the main ideas.

--helps listener to understand.

Purpose: to clarify the writer's own ideas about his/her paper.

Listener--tries to understand the author.

--asks for clarification when necessary.

--has three to rephrase the author's ideas.

--can take notes, but only important words or phrases can be written down.

Purpose: to practice rephrasing (paraphrasing)

Timer--makes sure time limits are not exceeded.

2. Procedures: After explaining the directions and answering any questions students may have, groups of three will be formed. Each group will then select its first author, listener and timer. When that has been done, begin the activity. I will float from group to group to observe and make sure the instructions are being followed correctly. Also, each student will have the opportunity to participate in the capacity of author, speaker and timer. Therefore, I will need to prompt groups to make the appropriate changes if they seem to be lagging behind the other groups.

3. Class reflection: Gives students a chance to respond and and give feedback about the activity.

4. Written student evaluations: Provides me with additional feedback.

Overview of the lesson:

Procedure	Time	Total
Explain directions	5	8
Set up groups of three	3	3
Select speaker, listener, and timer	2	10
Each speaker discusses his/her paper	12	22
Each listener responds	9	31
Class reflection	5	36
Written student evaluations	10	46

Appendix B

Below are some student comments about the impending understanding session elicited during one-on-one tutorials the day prior to class. Although the first person is used, these responses are not literal transcriptions. They are the result of the author recording student reactions shortly after tutorials ended.

Student 1: I'm nervous about doing this. I don't feel I have the vocabulary to handle it well. I don't give presentations in my field, so this will be difficult.

After some discussion she added that although she feels nervous, she is also excited about it. I told her that I am too.

Student 2: This activity will be more difficult for the listener than the speaker. I'm not concerned about presenting my ideas; I am an expert in my field. But again, the listening part will be difficult for me.

Student 3: This activity will be difficult.

Student 4: It's something new, so it will be tough. We are not used to doing this sort of thing.

Student 5: It's new, so it will be challenging. It's going to be difficult for most of us.

Appendix C

John Shannon

English 107G

An Understanding Session: Rephrasing

Student Evaluation

Please answer the following questions in as much detail as possible.

1. What did you like/dislike about this activity?

2. If this activity was helpful to you as a writer of English, how was it helpful?

3. If it was not helpful, how was it inappropriate?

4. Would you recommend that I use this activity more frequently (e.g., once for each of the three papers) next quarter? Why or why not?

5. As the speaker (the one being understood), were you able to adequately explain the main ideas of your paper? Y / N
   Do you think you were understood? Y / N Explain.

6. As the listener (the one doing the understanding), were you able to rephrase accurately the speaker's ideas? Y / N Explain.